KHRUSHCHEV AND STALIN: LEADERS OF THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

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In his opening address to the 21st Soviet Party Congress in Moscow on 27 January 1959, Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev mentioned only once the man who had ruled the USSR with absolute power for over 20 years. He praised the industrialization of the Soviet Union and the collectivization of her agriculture by "our people under the leadership of the Party and its Central Committee, which was headed for many years by J. V. Stalin." The late ruler was not mentioned again in the address.

This passing reference to the man whose memory dominated the proceedings of the 20th Party Congress in February 1956 raises the question of how far in fact the late dictator's policies have been abandoned. During the six years since Stalin's death there have been frequent claims that the USSR is evolving into a more "liberal" or "rational" system. Khrushchev's denunciation of some of Stalin's methods and actions three years ago was heralded as the beginning of a new era of moderation and evolution toward political democracy and individual freedom. But a study of the Soviet system and the striking similarities in the rise to power and the exercise of that power by both Stalin and Khrushchev suggest that this view is unrealistic.

The view that the Soviet regime is undergoing a fundamental change which will moderate the harshness of its totalitarian rule both in its relations with its own people and with the outside world rests on certain changes which are claimed to have taken place in the period since Stalin's death. Those who hold this view argue that these changes flow from the fact that Khrushchev has in fact abjured the aims and methods of his predecessor. Stalin's rule exemplified, perhaps more than any other known to history, the exercise of absolute power by one man. He succeeded in making himself supreme dictator and in maintaining his position by the ruthless elimination of all rivals, by the suppression of real or potential opposition groups through widespread purges, and by the glorification of himself as the indispensable leader.

Khrushchev promised at the end of his Secret Speech at the 20th Party Congress that the abuses of the Stalin period would never be repeated. However, an examination of Khrushchev's career since Stalin's death shows how little this assurance is worth.

When Stalin died in March 1953, his political heirs, the little group of men who for years had been closely associated with him in the inner circle of the Kremlin, proclaimed a "collective leadership." Malenkov was named Premier and head of the Party Central Committee Presidium. Beria, Molotov, Bulganin and Kaganovich became Deputy Premiers and Presidium members. Beria was named Internal Affairs Minister, combining the former ministries of Internal Affairs and State Security; Molotov, Foreign Minister; and Bulganin, War Minister. Marshal Zhukov became First Deputy Minister. Khrushchev was transferred from the post of Secretary of the Moscow Committee to the Central Committee Secretariat, which Malenkov headed as First Secretary. The Presidium, reduced to 10, consisted of Malenkov, Beria, Molotov, Voroshilov, Bulganin, Kaganovich, Mikoyan, Saburov, Pervukhin and Khrushchev.

Of this ruling group a triumvirate, Malenkov, Molotov and Beria, emerged as the most powerful. It was a short-lived arrangement. Nine days later, on 20 March 1953, Malenkov was relieved "at his own request" of the post of First Secretary although he remained head of the Presidium. Khrushchev was named chief of the 5-man Central Committee Secretariat.

Less than four months later, Beria was arrested and handed over to the Supreme Court for prosecution. Ousted from his Party and government posts, he was charged with seeking to seize power as an "agent" and "hireling" of foreign imperialists, plotting the restoration of capitalism, putting Internal Ministry affairs before those of the Party and the government, sabotaging agricultural policy (significantly, Khrushchev was head of the agrarian program), and stirring up nationalistic differences. Having "confessed" to these charges, he was found guilty and shot within 24 hours. Subsequently, efforts were made to erradicate his memory; subscribers were instructed to remove his name and the account of his career from the Great Soviet Encyclopedia.

Beria's execution was followed by that of six other high security officials including the former Minister of State Control, V. N. Merkulov, and S. A. Goglidze, former secret police chief in Siberia and the Far East. On 24 December 1954, ex-State Security Minister Abakumov and three aides were executed as Beria accomplices. The following year, six men including former Ministers Rukhadze and Rapava were executed and two men were sentenced to life imprisonment on the charge of plotting with Beria. One member of the triumvirate and his following were thus eliminated.

On 13 September 1953, Khrushchev was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee Secretariat. Although the job went now by a new title--Stalin had been known as Secretary General--it offered the same opportunity to gain control of the Party machinery. Khrushchev reorganized the Secretariat, replacing the men chosen by Stalin and Malenkov with those of his own following. Party Secretaries and other high officials throughout the USSR were swept out by the new broom to be replaced by Khrushchev's men from his former Ukraine machine or his former Moscow machine, or from subordinates previously associated with his agrarian activities.

With the exception of Beria and his associates in the Secret Police, the purge was bloodless. It was nonetheless effective. By February 1955, Khrushchev felt strong enough successfully to challenge Stalin's heir-apparent, Malenkov. Malenkov, confessing to errors in agriculture (which in fact only Khrushchev could have made since he had been pre-eminent in the field since the last years of Stalin's reign), and to "insufficient experience in local work...and in the direct guidance of individual branches of the national economy" was relieved "at his own request" of the premiership. He was made Minister of Electric Power Stations. The second member of the triumvirate was eclipsed.

A year later when the 20th Party Congress opened in February 1956 it was clear that Khrushchev was recognized by the other members of the "collective leadership" as "more equal than the others." Khrushchev gave all the major addresses at the Congress, occupied the central position in the photographs in Pravda, and alone of all the ruling group received "stormy, prolonged applause, transforming itself into an ovation. All rise."

If there were any doubts as to where the real center of power lay, they were quickly dispelled. In June 1957 the final showdown between Khrushchev and the other surviving heirs of Stalin's power took place. At a dramatic meeting of the Central Committee, Khrushchev won a decisive victory over the opposition--Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich and Shepilov. Labeled the "anti-Party group," they were accused of present and past crimes in charges that were frequently contradictory and patently untrue. Malenkov was accused of opposing the policy of more consumer goods, although he had done just the opposite during his term as Premier (1953-1955). He was also charged with fostering rigidity in cultural affairs.

At the same time Shepilov was accused of encouraging revisionism and nihilism among Soviet writers. He was further charged with hampering Soviet-Yugoslav relations even though he had replaced Molotov as Foreign Minister because of the latter's rigid adherence to Stalin's xenophobic foreign policy.

Expelled from the Central Committee and from their former positions of influence, the anti-Party group members were assigned to insignificant jobs far from the center of power. Molotov is now his country's Ambassador to Outer Mongolia; Kaganovich heads an asbestos plant in Soviet Asia; Malenkov is running a power plant in Siberia; and Shepilov is teaching school in Moscow.

During the course of these factional struggles, Khrushchev had the support of the Party machine, thanks to his control of the secretariat, and of the army, represented by Marshal Zhukov, Defense Minister. Zhukov, professional soldier, the hero of Berlin and the siege of Leningrad, had risen to political power almost as swiftly as Khrushchev himself. After Stalin's death in 1953 he had been named First Deputy Minister (one of three) in an effort to include in the "collective leadership" at least one member who enjoyed genuine popular support. Following Beria's expulsion and arrest, he was elected to fill the empty seat on the Central Committee. After Malenkov was downgraded, Zhukov was named Defense Minister, the Army's chief administrator and political representative. He became a candidate member of the Party's highest organ, the Central Committee Presidium, after the 20th Party Congress and won full membership in the June shake-up, the first genuine professional soldier ever to do so.

The army's increasing political stature was shown by the important, and in some cases decisive, role in the crises which followed Stalin's death. Since the exact details of Beria's elimination are not known, the role of the army is not clear. However, it is known that army units were moved into Moscow from outside military districts at the time of his arrest. Marshal Zhukov is stated by some reports personally to have had a part in seizing him.

The army leaders took a direct part in Malenkov's fall from power, casting their votes against him at the January 1955 Plenum of the Central Committee. The appointment of Marshal Zhukov as Defense Minister immediately thereafter suggests the importance of army support. In the crisis of June 1957, Zhukov supported Khrushchev in transferring action

from the Presidium, where the opposition was strong, to the Central Committee where Khrushchev's support lay. Furthermore, Zhukov supported Khrushchev in the Central Committee meeting and in subsequent public statements, pledging army support to the Party leadership, i.e. Khrushchev.

While Zhukov's support had been welcome to Khrushchev certain differences now began to develop between the two. In particular, Zhukov displayed an embarrassing zeal in uncovering the crimes of the Stalin purges and demanding that those responsible be brought to trial. In July, while Khrushchev and Bulganin were traveling in Czechoslovakia, Zhukov made a speech in Leningrad in which he called for a thorough investigation of the injustices done under Stalin. This probably was intended as a blow at Molotov and Kaganovich but it involved Khrushchev also. As political head of the Ukraine and later as secretary of the Party organization in Moscow, he had been deeply involved in the purges.

Zhukov alone of the Soviet leaders enjoyed considerable popularity among the Soviet people. Since the secret police had been downgraded, he commanded the only power group which could challenge the Party machine upon which Khrushchev depended for support. This combination of circumstances spelled finis to Zhukov's career. A few hours after his return from a trip to Yugoslavia and Albania in October 1957, he was abruptly dismissed as Defense Minister. Subsequently he was accused of abetting his own "cult of personality" and of seeking to undermine the Party leadership and control over the armed forces. He was dismissed from the Party Presidium and the Central Committee into an ignominious retirement. Not completely forgotten, however, he was assailed at a Ukrainian Communist Party congress on 20 January 1959 as a "revisionist," one of the most serious charges that can be made against a Communist Party member.

With the departure of Zhukov and his replacement by the politically colorless Malinovsky, Khrushchev eliminated his last serious rival for the position of supreme leader. The linking of Bulganin with the "anti-Party group" in November 1958 and his subsequent humiliation dispelled the last shred of illusion that a "collective leadership" existed, although Bulganin, since Khrushchev's assumption of the position of Premier in March 1958, obviously had been without any real power.

Today Khrushchev stands alone, where Stalin stood, at the summit of the power pyramid, the sole ruler of the USSR.

There is a striking similarity between Khrushchev's rise to power and that of Stalin. Stalin, too, found himself one of a group of co-workers and heirs when Lenin died in January 1924. Then, too, a "collective leadership" of Politbureau members was proclaimed. Stalin held the post of General Secretary of the Central Committee. Theoretically, his function was to coordinate the work of the various Party branches and to serve as a link between the Politbureau and the Central Control Commission, the supreme court of appeal for those accused of offenses against the Party. In fact, he made himself the boss of the Party machine and the chief conductor of the purges.

Taking full advantage of the fears and jealousies of his associates, Stalin began a series of political maneuvers aimed at the elimination of all rivals for the role of supreme leader. With the support of two other members of the Politbureau, Zinoviev and Kamenev, Stalin moved first against Trotsky, the most brilliant and the most likely successor among Lenin's heirs. Trotsky was forced to resign as Commissar of War in 1925 and the following year was expelled from the Politbureau. In 1927 he was expelled from the Party and exiled, first to Siberia and later to the Turkish island of Prinkipo.

With Trotsky out of the way, Stalin turned against his former allies. Zinoviev and Kamenev, expelled from the Party for refusing to accept Stalin's "socialism in one country" theory, followed Trotsky into exile in Siberia. To accomplish this, Stalin had allied himself with Rykov, Premier of the Soviet Government; Bukharin, head of the Communist International; and Tomsky, trade union leader. In 1929 they, too, learned the danger of underestimating the General Secretary. All three were deposed, removed from the Politbureau and expelled from the Party. Stalin's ascendancy was complete.

To date, Stalin had been content with demoting or exiling his defeated opponents. But the dynamics of dictatorship, exemplified by General de Narvaez who had no enemies to forgive when he was dying because he had had them all shot, drove the dictator to feel that more stringent measures must be taken to suppress his opponents. On the pretext of avenging the murder of Kirov in Leningrad on 1 December 1934

(a crime which Stalin himself arranged, according to Khrushchev), thousands of Party members, including every member of Lenin's Politbureau except Stalin and Trotsky, were tried and executed. Other tens of thousands of suspects were imprisoned or deported to Siberia. In an effort to shoot all his enemies, Stalin attacked every group which appeared capable of opposition, concentrating with particular ferocity on the army which lost Marshal Tukhachevsky and a group of the highest generals as well as an estimated 5,000 officers from the lower ranks.

Advocates of the "liberal" view point out that, with the exception of Beria and his followers, Khrushchev's opponents are still alive. However, Stalin's blood purges began only in the mid-thirties. It was 1936 before he dared to have his arch enemy Trotsky condemned to death and 1940 before Trotsky was assassinated. At the comparable stage in his climb to power, Stalin, too, behaved "liberally" to his rivals, only exiling them to Siberia.

It is, however, not only in the circumstances of his climb to power that Khrushchev has shown himself to be Stalin's heir and worthy successor. Khrushchev in his speech to the 20th Party Congress ascribed all the horrors of Stalin's reign of terror to the cult of his own personality which the dictator had fostered. Khrushchev promised "to condemn and eradicate the cult of the individual...and to fight inexorably all attempts at bringing back this practice...." Current developments in the USSR suggest that Khrushchev is now engaged in building up around himself exactly the same cult of the infallible and omnipotent leader.

As early as the 20th Party Congress in 1956 there were indications that such a cult was being established. By December 1958, when the Soviet Party Central Committee met in plenary session, the glorification of Khrushchev was well advanced. Speaker after speaker praised him in the most fulsome terms. His wisdom and knowledge were hailed in speeches that thanked him for teaching the nation how to grow corn, to raise ducks and to breed sheep. One speaker declared that the outstanding event in the life of the people was the September 1953 Central Committee Plenum's acceptance of Khrushchev's agricultural policies. To his industry, will power, patience and decisiveness was attributed the defeat of the "anti-Party" group in the struggle in which he was credited with "routing out their anti-Party intrigues."

Khrushchev dominated the proceedings. He gave the opening and closing addresses and interrupted practically every speaker to make comments and corrections. In fact some of the speeches appeared to be prepared dialogues arranged in order to show off his agricultural expertise. The meeting was clearly planned to project the image of Khrushchev as the supreme leader, possessed of extraordinary wisdom and power paternally guiding and protecting his people.

On 27 December 1958 the cult advanced another stage when Khrushchev was hailed as a theoretician in the tradition of Marx and Lenin. Polyansky, Premier of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, in a speech declared that Khrushchev had, as no one else had, "the clear foresight to work out new aspects of the theory and practice of Communist building." No other living Soviet leader since Stalin has been acclaimed in similar terms.

The 21st Party Congress which opened in January 1959 showed Stalin's mantle further adapted for use by the present ruler. Khrushchev was praised extravagantly for all the accomplishments--scientific, industrial, and agricultural--of the USSR. His seven-year plan was acclaimed as a masterpiece both for the USSR and the whole Communist world. His status as a theoretician "leading the country along the Leninist path" was re-affirmed. The "anti-Party" group was attacked again. Castigated as "malicious" and "treacherous," it provided a symbol of the futility and danger of opposing Khrushchev. Its defeat, according to Suslov, Soviet theoretician, restored "the Leninist principles of leadership." The familiar Stalinist trick of rewriting history so as to put the blame for failures of the regime upon its defeated opponents was revived when the "anti-Party" group was accused of causing the problems that hindered the development of electric power.

It is in the satellites, however, where the persistence of the Stalinist system of terror and naked force may be seen most clearly. The death of Stalin was followed in the satellites by a wave of unrest and striving for freedom from the rigid system of Moscow control. The pendulum of Soviet policy swung briefly toward a period of relaxation of political pressure. But the resulting demands for greater freedom resulted in a reimposition of the harsh Stalinist rule in the spring of 1957.

In Hungary Khrushchev's determination to tolerate no deviations from the policy of strict adherence to the Moscow line can be seen at its most ruthless. The tragic and heroic revolt of Hungarian workers in October-November 1956 was suppressed by Russian tanks and guns. In June 1958 official announcement was made that former Premier Imre Nagy, General Pal Maleter and two other leaders of the uprising had been executed. The circumstances of their liquidation--the secret trial, the manufactured charges, the delayed announcement ("The sentences are final. The death sentences have been executed")--were an unmistakable echo of Stalin's brutal methods.

Khrushchev's adherence to Stalin's methods and aims is visible also in the other satellites. Poland, which had won a greater degree of internal freedom than any other satellite, now shows the prevailing trend toward reaction. Workers' councils, initially expected to assume some responsibility in factory management, have now been transformed into "conferences of workers' self-government" in which the Party has the veto over proposals made by the workers' representatives. At the Trade Union Congress in April 1958, First Secretary Gomulka declared that strikes were virtually illegal and re-affirmed the subservience of trade unions to the ruling Party. Freedom of expression proved also to be a temporary gain. Press censorship has been tightened, new restrictions have been announced for publishers, and many writers who supported the October upheaval have been dismissed.

In Czechoslovakia 100,000 "politically unreliable" employees have been dismissed from the government, nationalized industries, and other agencies in a mass purge. Throughout the satellite empire the return to the hard Stalinist line may be seen and with it the abandonment of hope that a more "relaxed" system might evolve after the death of the old dictator.

In his conduct of satellite affairs, in his encouragement of the burgeoning cult of his own personality, and in his ruthless disposal of rival claimants to supreme power, Khrushchev has proved himself a dictator firmly dedicated to carrying on the absolutism and repressive measures of his late master, Stalin.